



Research Paper: Predicting the Occurrence of Marital Conflicts based on Forgiveness, Humor, and Emotional Intimacy



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Abstract

Objective: Marital conflicts negatively affect couples' emotional, communicative, and social functioning, ultimately leading to the deterioration of their relationships. This study aimed to predict the occurrence of marital conflicts based on forgiveness, humor, and intimacy.

Methods: The method of this research was descriptive-correlational. The population included all women with marital conflict in Rasht, 150 of whom were selected by a convenience sampling method. Data were collected using the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), Personality Assessment Questionnaire (PAI), Humor Styles Questionnaire (SHQ), and Marital Forgiveness Questionnaire (MFS). Data analysis was performed using the Pearson correlation coefficient and stepwise regression analysis with SPSS-22 software.

Results: The findings showed that there is a negative and significant relationship between marital conflicts and forgiveness, humor, and emotional intimacy. Moreover, the results of regression analysis showed that the predictor variables explained 22.6% in the first step, 30.4% in the second step, and 35.5% in the third step of the severity of marital conflicts ($P < 0.05$).

Conclusion: According to the findings, it can be concluded that by increasing forgiveness, humor, and emotional intimacy between couples, the severity of marital conflicts can be reduced.

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1. Introduction

Marriage is the first and most important stage in the family life cycle, and success in other stages of life depends on success in this stage. Therefore, if couples have a healthy relationship and are free from marital conflicts, we can hope to create a healthy family and, consequently, a healthy society (Ventura-Leon et al., 2025). Typically, the first days of marriage are accompanied by a sense of commitment between the couple, but some couples gradually experience communication problems and marital conflicts (Dong et al., 2022). Therefore, the occurrence of conflicts in marital relationships is common and inevitable and can be considered one of the natural problems in every life together (Neumann, 2018).

Marital conflicts appear as a type of contradictory behavior between two married people, at least one of whom causes conflict. Typically, their emotional, communicative, and social functions are negatively affected, ultimately leading to the deterioration of their relationships (Zare-Mirakabad et al., 2024). Marital conflicts, in most cases, are the result of multiple factors such as personality differences, misunderstanding of needs and expectations, financial problems, and even external influences from culture and society (Lu et al., 2024). These conflicts can cause the formation of negative emotions such as distrust, anger, frustration, and emotional isolation, which, over time, lead to emotional coldness and distance between couples (Tawashi et al., 2023). Findings from various studies (Abbas et al., 2019; Makhanova et al., 2018) show that couples who experience more marital conflicts are not in a favorable

state in terms of mental and physical health, and an increase in these conflicts is usually associated with higher levels of incompatibility in relationships and increases the likelihood of divorce (Cheung et al., 2022).

Creating and maintaining intimate relationships and satisfying emotional and psychological needs during marriage is a skill and art that, in addition to mental health and healthy early experiences, requires having logical attitudes and acquiring specific skills and tasks (Parsakia et al., 2023). Jurkane-Hobein (2015) believes that one of the major problems of couples in maintaining close relationships is their level of intimacy, and intimacy is an essential component of marital relationships that has been diminished today due to obstacles or social norms in married life. It is believed that following the emergence of problems in couples' lives, intimacy is an important factor for dialogue and communication and a kind of deterrent from further problems in couples (Blatterer, 2015). Intimacy includes spending time with the other person, listening to each other, having an honest relationship full of mutual trust, and, in other words, showing oneself to the other verbally and non-verbally (Choi et al., 2020). Emotional intimacy is closeness, similarity, and a romantic or emotional personal relationship with another person that involves a deep understanding of the other person's thoughts and feelings and serves as a source of similarity and closeness (Yoo et al., 2014; Rahimi and Mousavi, 2020). Lack of intimacy in marriage causes psychosocial maladjustment, depression, and emotional disorders (Waring & Patton, 1984; İyiyaydın

& Sümer, 2023). In other words, high marital intimacy is a positive factor that can increase emotional stability in both parties and act as a protector in their relationship (Lee et al., 2021). Research shows that unresolved conflicts, especially in the long term, reduce couples' emotional intimacy (Pratham et al., 2024). Ziroglu et al. (2023) also showed in a study that couples who face high marital conflicts in their relationships are at serious risk of marital breakdown due to deep disorders in emotional and communication interactions. In addition, Ebrahimi and Banifatmeh (2014) found that the coldness of relationships and the decrease in intimacy between couples are mostly due to unfulfilled expectations between couples. Therefore, the more efficient couples act, the better and more coherent their relationship will be, which will reduce marital conflicts (Bakhshi et al., 2012).

Another variable associated with marital conflicts is humor, which, as a positive trait, can play a role in reducing marital conflicts. Humor is an important factor in individual attractiveness in relationships between couples and increases the desire to have romantic and desirable relationships in couples (Hall, 2013). Humor can be a tool for communicating with others and reveals the deep feelings, beliefs, and desires of individuals. The role of humor in dealing with everyday stress, creating appropriate social relationships, facilitating the resolution of life problems, and also managing emotions and motivation is important (Wilbur & Campbell, 2011; Ziegler-Hill & Besser, 2013). Humor refers to the habitual differences of individuals in all behaviors,

experiences, emotions, attitudes, and abilities related to entertainment, laughing, joking, and the like (Martin, 2001). In recent decades, a sense of humor has been proposed not only as a highly socially desirable personality trait but also as an important component of mental health (Leon-Perez et al., 2021; Timofeiov-Tudose & Mairean, 2023). In addition to enhancing positive emotions and counteracting negative moods, humor seems to be a valuable mechanism for coping with stressful life events and an important social skill for establishing, maintaining, and enhancing appropriate interpersonal relationships (Martin, 2010). Mirseifi Fard et al. (2017) found that people who are more humorous are more likely to express their problems and try to reduce their sadness by supporting others in the face of everyday problems, which makes them enjoy interacting with others more and feel more effective. Humor enhances a spouse's attractiveness and helps improve marital quality, but it can also cause problems or disconnection (McGee & Shevlin, 2009; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011; Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2010). Research has shown that accommodating humor styles in which respect for the other party is maintained are negatively related to marital conflict and positively related to marital satisfaction (Yip & Martin, 2006; Butzer & Kuiper, 2008; Cann et al., 2009; Saroglou et al., 2010).

Another way to reduce marital conflicts is to practice forgiveness by couples, which requires freedom from renewed and recurring anger and hostility, a lack of desire for revenge, and a decision to show compassion, empathy, or regret for the offender (Akhtar et

al., 2017). Forgiveness is a conscious and voluntary motivation that increases positive emotions and replaces negative emotions (Saffarian Tosi et al., 2018). Forgiveness in relationships between couples allows the relationship to continue despite mistakes, betrayals, or failures, and brings couples closer together again. The result of such cohesion is increased satisfaction with marital life and a rational effort to resolve communication conflicts (Ahmadi Ardakani and Fatemi Oghada, 2019; Celik et al., 2022). Agu and Nwankwo (2019) believe that forgiveness in a marital relationship leads to the durability of marriage, improved communication performance, treatment of couples' psychological problems, and improvement of their physical health. In addition, based on the results of various studies, forgiveness can be related to marital relationship satisfaction (Fupšová & Záhorcová, 2022; Mendes-Teixeira & Duarte, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021).

Given the increasing concerns about family mental health and the important role of marital conflicts in the quality of life of couples, identifying the factors affecting the occurrence of these conflicts is of particular importance. Forgiveness, humor, and emotional intimacy are among the personality and behavioral characteristics that can play a protective role against the occurrence of marital tensions and conflicts. The present study, with the aim of investigating the prediction of the occurrence of marital conflicts in women based on these three variables, can help to more accurately understand the psychological mechanisms effective in the stability of couples'

relationships and provide a scientific basis for providing psychological interventions and training. The necessity of this study is important because the results can pave the way for designing prevention programs and improving interpersonal skills in couples, and by providing reliable data, strengthen clinical and counseling decisions. In addition, addressing the role of humor and emotional intimacy, which have received less attention in domestic studies, will help enrich the country's research literature.

2. Methods

2.1. Population, Sample, and Sampling

The method of this study was descriptive correlational. The population included all married women in Rasht in 1404, from which 150 people were selected as a sample using convenience sampling. Finally, descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics, including the Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regression, were used to analyze the data obtained in this study. All data analysis was performed using SPSS version 22 software.

2.2. Instruments

Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ):

A self-report instrument consisting of 42 questions developed by Barati and Sanai (1996) based on clinical experiences in Iran to measure the nature and extent of marital conflicts. This questionnaire consists of 7 subscales, including: decreased sexual intercourse; increased child support; increased personal relationship with one's relatives; decreased personal relationship with spouse's relatives and friends; separation of financial matters from each

other; and increased emotional reactions. The maximum total score of the questionnaire is 210, and the minimum is 42. The options are scored on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely, never). Barati and Sanai (1996) found Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total score of the scale to be 0.53 and for the subscales between 0.30 and 0.64. In the study by Lavaf et al. (2015), the reliability of the Marital Conflict Questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.72.

Personal Assessment of Intimacy Questionnaire (PAI):

The Personal Assessment of Intimacy Questionnaire of Shaffer and Elson (1981) is a 36-item instrument that measures intimacy in six dimensions: emotional, social, sexual, rational, recreational, and conventional on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). In the present study, the emotional intimacy subscale of this questionnaire was used. A higher score in this questionnaire indicates greater intimacy, and a lower score indicates less intimacy. Shaffer and Elson (1981) estimated the validity of the subscales of the Personal Assessment of Intimacy Questionnaire using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient method between 0.7 and 0.77, which was 0.75 for the emotional intimacy subscale. Khojasteh Mehr et al. (2016) also obtained the validity of the emotional intimacy scale using the Cronbach's alpha method of 0.63. Similarly, Shafer and Elson (1981) calculated the correlation coefficient of the Personal Assessment of Intimacy Questionnaire with the Self-Disclosure, Marital Adjustment, and Moos Family

Context Questionnaires, and the obtained correlation coefficients indicated the desirable convergent validity of the questionnaire. Khojasteh Mehr et al. (2016) also calculated the correlation coefficient with the Walker and Thompson Intimacy Scale in order to measure the validity of the questionnaire, and all coefficients were significant and indicated the desirable psychometric validity index of the questionnaire.

Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ):

The Humor Styles Questionnaire was used to measure humor. This questionnaire, developed by Khosouei et al. (2009), consists of 25 questions that were factor analyzed on a seven-point scale using the principal components method and Varimax rotation, yielding a five-factor structure (enjoyment of humor, laughter, verbal humor, humor in social relationships, and humor in stressful situations). In this questionnaire, each subject receives a separate score for each component or dimension and a final score for the entire questionnaire. A high score indicates greater humor. The total score for each subject in the entire questionnaire ranges from 25 to 125, and for each dimension from 5 to 25. Reliability, using Cronbach's alpha, was reported as 0.81, 0.80, 0.77, and 0.80 for self-promotional, bonding, aggressive, and self-defeating styles, respectively. Reliability using the test-retest method was also reported as 0.81, 0.85, 0.80, and 0.82 for self-promotional, bonding, aggressive, and self-defeating styles, respectively. Validity was also assessed by correlating the situational humor questionnaire with the self-promotional, bonding, aggressive, and self-

defeating styles, respectively, yielding 0.43, 0.27, 0.12, and 0.01, which showed a significant relationship at the $p < 0.01$ level in positive dimensions of humor, but no significant relationship was obtained in negative dimensions of humor. Also, the humorous coping style was found to be 0.53, 0.27, -0.28, and -0.26, respectively, with the self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating styles, all of which are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Marital Forgiveness Scale (MFS):

This scale was developed by [Rye et al. \(2001\)](#) and consists of 15 questions. Factor analysis of the scale revealed two factors: one factor includes items that indicate the absence of negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward the offender (negative absence, questions 1-10). The other factor includes items that indicate the presence of positive thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward the offender (positive presence, questions 11-15). Therefore, the present scale measures both negative and positive responses. The scale was originally developed to measure women's reactions to the wrongs they had seen in their romantic relationships; however, the questions were later modified to include all people and any type of wrongdoing. The scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The scoring of questions (3, 1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, and 14) is inverse. High scores indicate forgiveness, and low scores indicate a lack of forgiveness. [Rye et al. \(2001\)](#) reported Cronbach's alpha for "absence of negative", "presence of positive", and the entire questionnaire as 0.86, 0.85, and 0.87, respectively. In line with the convergent validity of the questionnaire, forgiveness was

examined by comparing the scores obtained from this questionnaire with the Enright Forgiveness Questionnaire among 328 male and female students with an average age of 19 years, and a correlation of 0.52 to 0.75 was obtained. In Iran, the Cronbach's alpha of this test on 200 married female students of Tehran universities was 0.96, and the validity of this scale was also confirmed through correlation with the New Five-Factor Inventory, respectively, with neuroticism 0.45, with agreeableness 0.52, with extraversion 0.33, with agreeableness 0.42, and with openness 0.35. [Zandipour et al. \(2011\)](#). In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha method was obtained for the subcomponents of absence of negative emotions, presence of positive emotions, and the total forgiveness scale as 0.75, 0.83, and 0.82, respectively.

3. Results

The research sample consisted of 150 married women living in Rasht. 66 (44%) were in the 25-35 age group, 52 (34.7%) were in the 36-45 age group, 23 (15.3%) were in the 46-55 age group, and 9 (6%) were over 55 years old. Correspondingly, the level of education showed that 37 (24.7%) of the subjects studied had a bachelor's degree or higher, 16 (10.7%) had an associate's degree, 78 (52%) had a bachelor's degree, and 19 (12.7%) had a master's degree. The employment status of the women studied also showed that 93 (62%) were employed and 57 (38%) were housewives. Likewise, the study of the duration of marriage showed that 45 of the subjects (30%) had been married for less than a year, 56 (37.3%) for one to five years, 15 (10%) for six to ten years, and the

remaining 34 (22.7%) had been married for more than ten years. 110 of the subjects (73.3%) had no children, 18 (12%) had one child, and 22 (14.7%) had two children.

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation, minimum and maximum values, and skewness and elongation indices of the research variables.

Table1
Mean and standard deviation of descriptive research indicators

Component	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
Couple Conflicts	34.44	1.52	9	147	1.64	1.30
Humor	109.04	2.20	52	158	-0.30	-0.42
Forgiveness	63.12	1.00	32	82	-0.46	0.50
Intimacy	13.90	2.00	7	24	0.43	1.12

Table 1 showed that the mean and standard deviation for couple conflicts were 34.44 ± 1.52 , humor was 109.04 ± 2.2 , forgiveness was 63.12 ± 1 , and intimacy was

13.90 ± 2 . The skewness and kurtosis indices also indicate that these data are in a normal distribution. The correlation matrix of research variables is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Pearson correlation matrix to examine the relationship between the occurrence of Marital conflicts and Humor, Forgiveness, and Intimacy.

*P<0.05 **p<0.01

Component	Couple Conflicts	Humor	Forgiveness	Intimacy
Couple Conflicts	1			
Humor	-0.475** 0.001	1		
Forgiveness	-0.339** 0.001	0.233** 0.004	1	
Intimacy	-0.361** 0.001	0.181* 0.026	0.072 0.384	1

The results of the Pearson correlation matrix showed that there is a negative and significant relationship between marital conflicts and the indicators of humor, forgiveness, and intimacy ($P < 0.001$).

and intimacy. The results of examining the normal distribution of variables, the assumption of independence of errors by the Durbin Watson test (Durbin Watson = 1.337) showed that the necessary statistical assumptions were met. A summary of the regression model for predicting marital conflicts is presented in Table 3.

Stepwise regression analysis was used to examine the predictability of marital conflicts based on the variables of humor, forgiveness,

Table 3

Summary of the regression models for predicting Marital conflicts

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R	Standard Error
1	0.475	0.22	0.22	13.70
2	0.551	0.30	0.29	13.04
3	0.596	0.35	0.34	12.59

The summary results of the regression model showed that humor, forgiveness, and emotional intimacy predict the marital conflicts of the women studied during the three steps, and the R² value shows that 22.6 percent in the first step, 30.4 percent in the

second step, and 35.5 percent in the third step of the level of marital conflicts of women can be explained based on the predictor variables. [Table 4](#) presents the results of the analysis of variance to test this model.

Table 4

Results of analysis of variance to predict Marital conflicts based on predictor variables

Steps	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Significance Level
1	8113.96	1	8113.96	43.18	0.001
	27804.99	148	187.87		
	35918.96	149			
2	10915.55	2	5457.77	32.087	0.001
	25003.40	147	170.09		
	35918.96	149			
3	12758.82	3	4252.94	26.81	0.001
	23160.14	146	158.63		
	35918.96	149			

The results of the analysis of variance showed that humor, Forgiveness, and Emotional Intimacy predict the reduction in marital conflicts over three steps. [Table 5](#)

presents the results of the standardized and unstandardized coefficients entered into the model.

Table 5

Standardized coefficients were entered into the model to predict marital conflicts of the women studied.

Steps		B	Standard Error	Beta	T	Significance Level	VIF	tolerance
1	Humor	-0.304	0.046	-0.475	-6.572	0.001	1.00	1.00
2	Humor	-0.271	0.045	-0.424	-6.056	0.001	0.967	1.034
	Intimacy Emotional	-1.467	0.361	-0.284	-4.058	0.001	0.967	1.034
3	Humor	-0.237	0.044	-0.371	-5.349	0.001	0.919	1.089
	Intimacy	-1.430	0.349	-0.277	-4.096	0.001	0.966	1.035
	Emotional Forgiveness	-0.361	0.106	-0.233	-3.409	0.001	0.945	1.058

Marital conflicts = 102.98 (constant) -0.237 (Humor) -1.430 (Emotional Intimacy) -0.361 (Forgiveness)

According to the t-value and significance level, it was determined that in the first step, humor, in the second step, the two variables humor and emotional intimacy, and finally in

4. Discussion

The present study was conducted to investigate the role of forgiveness, humor, and intimacy in predicting women's marital conflicts. The results of the Pearson correlation matrix showed that there is a negative and significant relationship between marital conflicts and the indicators of humor, forgiveness, and intimacy. Correspondingly, the regression results showed that humor, forgiveness, and intimacy predict the marital conflicts of the women studied in three steps, and the R² value shows that in the first step, 22.6 percent, in the second step, 30.4 percent, and in the third step, 35.5 percent of the level of marital conflicts of women can be explained based on the predictor variables.

the third step, humor, emotional intimacy, and forgiveness have the greatest contribution to predicting marital conflicts in the women studied.

The above finding was in accordance with the findings of previous studies (Abbas et al., 2019; Pratham et al., 2024; Ebrahimi & Banifatmeh, 2014; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011; Saroglou et al., 2010; and Yip & Martin, 2006). In explaining the above results, it can be stated that the family, as the most important social institution, plays a decisive role in the health of the individual and society, and any disruption in marital relations can challenge the functioning of the family. In families where there are marital conflicts, factors such as emotional intimacy, humor, and forgiveness can play a role as effective variables in predicting and reducing these conflicts. In other words, the existence

of emotional intimacy between couples increases empathy, reduces misunderstandings, promotes a sense of closeness and psychological security, and increases the ability of spouses to express emotions and solve common problems. Couples who have a higher level of intimacy tend to manage conflicts more constructively and are less likely to get caught up in negative cycles of interaction. The results of [Yarigarravesh & Hosseinizadeh's \(2022\)](#) study showed that there is an inverse and significant relationship between intimacy and marital conflict, meaning that as intimacy between couples increases, conflicts between them decrease. Similarly, [Greeff & Malherbe's \(2001\)](#) study showed that emotional intimacy is directly related to increased marital satisfaction and reduced marital conflict.

Humor is a very important variable for understanding marital satisfaction, and couples can use it during stressful times in their lives to reduce tension and create moments of joy in conflict situations. The level of humor in couples can be an indication of how they manage marital conflicts. Couples who use humor positively and constructively are often better able to reduce tension and anticipate and manage conflicts. Conversely, a lack of humor or its negative use can be an indication of a greater likelihood of conflicts ([Erickson & Feldstein, 2006](#)). Humor can reduce tensions arising from conflicts and provide a basis for calm and effective dialogue. The results of the study by [Fallah & Aboulghasemi \(2015\)](#) showed that humor is significantly related to interpersonal conflict resolution styles in

incompatible couples. [Bakhshipour \(2015\)](#) also showed in a study that accommodating humor styles have a negative correlation with marital conflict and some of its components, and there is no significant correlation between unaccommodating humor styles and marital conflict and its components.

According to the results of various studies, forgiveness has important benefits for health, well-being, and the quality of interpersonal relationships ([Ghobari-Bonab et al., 2008](#); [Karremans et al., 2003](#)). Forgiveness helps couples overcome each other's mistakes and shortcomings and prevents the continuation of hostility. Research also shows that forgiveness is the foundation of a successful marriage and is an important element in the process of improving relationships after severe trauma. Forgiveness can also improve couples' communication performance and reduce negative emotions such as resentment, hatred, and anger ([Fakouri-Ashkiki et al., 2023](#)). The results of [Fincham et al.'s \(2006\)](#) study showed that women who scored high on the forgiveness factor reported lower levels of conflict with their husbands. In this study, the reason for the reduction in marital conflicts was the high number of couples, and since marital conflict is one of the components of family strength in the present study, the present study was in line with the research of [Fincham et al \(2006\)](#).

[Amanellahi et al. \(2018\)](#) also showed that forgiveness has the ability to predict marital conflicts and that a high level of forgiveness plays a role in the lowest level of marital conflicts. In explaining the above results, it can be said that forgiveness, humor, and emotional intimacy are able to predict the

level of marital conflicts in women. Women who have a higher level of forgiveness can manage differences with patience and flexibility and prevent conflict from escalating.

The present study had some limitations. First, the use of self-report questionnaires can be affected by respondent bias. Second, the research design was cross-sectional, and it is not possible to examine causal and long-term relationships between variables. Third, the population was limited to married women, which makes it difficult to generalize the

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present study, this study has practical applications for family counseling and clinical psychology professionals and can help couples better manage marital conflicts and improve the quality of their relationships. Special attention should be paid to training and strengthening the skills of forgiveness, emotional intimacy, and humor in couples so that they can better manage everyday tensions and conflicts. Furthermore, this study can be a guide for designing prevention programs and targeted psychological interventions in families to increase mental health and marital satisfaction.

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results to other groups. It is suggested that future research should conduct longitudinal and interventional studies to examine the real role of these variables in reducing marital conflicts. Besides, the use of qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, can reveal more dimensions of intimacy, humor, and forgiveness in marital relationships. In addition, designing training workshops in counseling centers to promote these skills in couples can play an effective role in preventing and reducing conflicts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any organization. Also, this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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